

VOICES OF 1968
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

University of Delaware Library, Museums and Press

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Interview location: One-Button Studio, Morris Library, University of Delaware

Interviewee: Steven Leech (SL)

Interviewer: Rebecca Johnson Melvin (RJM)

Transcription: Rebecca Johnson Melvin

Note: Steven Leech brought two books to the interview and referenced them in his oral history: Frank, Bill, and Joseph J Hanson. *Bill Frank's Delaware*. Wilmington, Del.: Middle Atlantic Press, 1987, and Leech, Steven. *Powmia among the Dragonflies*. [Newark, Del.]: 2013.

Timestamp (hour:minute:seconds)

00:00:02 RJM: Okay. This is Rebecca Johnson Melvin, and today is January 21st, 2019, and today is Martin Luther King Day, which is an interesting coincidence. This is a recording for the Voices of 1968 Oral History Project. Today I am talking to (prompt) your name:

00:00:28 SL: Steven Leech

RJM: Great. So, thanks for being with us. And as we've talked, we're looking for stories of Delawareans in 1968. So can you give us some background about where you were and what brought you up to 1968. Where are you from?

00:00:48 SL: Well, yeah, I'm an original Delawarean. My family's been here for hundreds of years. And that's on both sides. I grew up in Richardson Park and Richardson

Park is right across from the southern city limits of Wilmington. So, basically it's Wilmington. I went to Conrad High School.

00:01:19 RJM: What year did you graduate?

00:01:22 SL: 1962, and I took a year off, you know, to decide what I wanted to do, whether to go into the service or to go to college. And I had actually decided to go to college because I used that year to save up money to go to college. It didn't cost as much then as it does now. So, I matriculated into Wesley College in 1963. A memorable year, because I remember where I was when Kennedy was assassinated. That's where I was.

00:02:04 SL: And I went there for a little, about five semesters, I guess. And I was in the process of transferring to the University of Delaware and I lost my draft deferment status. And they snapped me up very quickly in 1966, Summer '66. I reported for the draft on July 6th, 1966, and went through the various trainings, the various bases, all in the South: Fort Bragg, Fort Jackson, Fort Gordon, ultimately Fort Campbell. And when I got there, one of the GIs says, "Oh, you just joining the unit?" And I said, "Yeah." He says, "Oh, great, we leave for Vietnam in two weeks." And I said, "Whoa," you know, because you're supposed to get a little leave before you go to Vietnam. So, I went to my commanding officer at the time; he wrote me out a leave and I came home for about a week, really. And when I got back, I reported to the armory building there on 10th and DuPont Street, Wilmington, and went through all the things that ultimately took me to Vietnam.

00:03:37 RJM: So, was that an enlistment period of two years?

00:03:47 SL: Yeah. It was an enlistment period of two years. Though, for me—yeah, yeah—as a draftee. Yeah, if you were regular army, it would be a three-year hitch. But for me it was two years. I didn't serve two years, but I'll explain that later.

00:04:03 RJM: What branch and unit were you in?

00:04:05 SL: At that point, I was with the 20th Transportation Unit and they were stationed at Fort Campbell, Kentucky. And they went over as an entire unit to Vietnam. We flew to Oakland and boarded a troop ship and took that slow boat to China. It was an exciting trip. It really was. During that trip, I took one book with me and that was *Catch-22*. And I said, “Well, this is wild, none of this happens.” Well, it turned out that most of it did when I got to Vietnam. And there were characters in the book that were like the ones that I knew. But it was an amazing trip. We started out in a storm. I got terribly seasick, as did a lot of the GIs. Because the ship would go like this (hand waving side to side). At the same time, it would go like this (hand waving up and down). And it made me pretty sick. But then the waters calmed down and some things that I saw at sea were just absolutely amazing. First of all, at nighttime, when there was no clouds in the sky, you could see everything up there. There were zillions and zillions of stars and you could see the Milky Way. And when we came through the Philippines, it was very peaceful there. And you could actually sit on the side of the ship and look down and see all the jellyfish and the flying fish that came out of the water in formations. And on the loudspeakers, they were playing Hawaiian music. And it was really kind of peaceful. Then I looked up in the sky and saw this huge squadron of B-52s coming back; there must have been a dozen of them. And of course, we had a little bit of shore leave in the Philippines at Subig Bay.

00:06:21 SL: And then from there, we went to Vietnam and there were three stops. And my stop was the last one; *our* stop was the last one. And I remember that when we stopped at Vung Tau, which was the port there, and it was driving rain. And we disembarked on the side of the ship onto a raft and then from there on to a landing craft. And we got into the landing craft and the rain is pouring down. And the guy who is driving the landing craft actually got stuck on a sand bar. And he worked his way off of it. We came into the beach there, Vung Tau, and just like in the movies, the landing craft comes up, the door drops down, you know, and you expect to be hit by a hail of bullets or something, but all we saw was this lady walking across, so it was quiet. So, we all got off, dripping wet, and were taken to an airplane. It was a C-130, I think. And we all were piled into the airplane, all standing up. Standing up. It took off. We were standing up. Took the short flight to Tan Son Nhut, which is outside of Saigon. All standing up, landed standing up. And then we were loaded on trucks on a convoy.

00:08:03 SL: And we ... and this was in March of '67? No, I'm sorry, May of '67. We boarded the ships in April of '67. The trip across the ocean took about a month. We got on in-country in May. But from Saigon, we went by truck convoy to a place called Cu Chi. And Cu Chi was in War Zone D. On one side, as we were coming in, we saw this guy hung. This is what we're coming up against. As a matter of fact, a few years later ...

00:08:58 RJM: Was that a soldier or a Vietnamese?

00:09:00 SL: No, that was a Vietnamese guy. And I learned from a book later on, who that person was. A book called *The Tunnels of Cu Chi*. And I learned that he was a barber who had been caught. He was a spy basically, and he was caught and so they lynched him. And on the other side of Cu Chi, you could watch the

jungle just kind of roll back, because of Agent Orange. They defoliated the foliage.

SL: And here's a picture of me in Cu Chi (shows back cover of *Powmia Among the Dragonflies* by Steven Leech). This is me; I'm standing out front of my hooch, looking all ready for war and all that sort of thing. But that was taken ...

00:09:54 RJM: How old were you then?

00:10:00 SL: Let's see, in '66, 23. And so I served there in Cu Chi until about August of '67. Then I got lucky because at Cu Chi, you know, there was, you know, war going on. I mean, I wasn't directly involved because I was, my MOS was 05 C-20, which means that I was in a communications thing. I did, well, one of the things that I did there was to sit in a bunker at nighttime, waiting for an alert that rockets were coming in, rockets and mortars were coming in. Because that's when, mostly when, the action was happening, which was at night. And then I had to alert the troops. The first were the officers and they were done separately because they were in air-conditioned barracks and didn't hear the siren, which I hit next to alert everyone else. When sirens went off, everybody headed to their bunkers. And I did other things there, switchboard stuff, working telephone calls, stringing wire. But then in August I got real lucky and I was transferred to Vung Tau.

00:11:30 SL: Vung Tau was the in-country R and R spot. It was right there on the coast of the South China Sea, due east of Saigon. And it was really built up. Everyone was there. The Americans were there, the Australians were there. The Republic of Korea was there. It was like Sin City. Anything you wanted, you could get it. So, I was there for the rest of the war. Everything was kind of peaceful, kind of wild, you know. I was ...

00:12:16 RJM: What were your responsibilities there?

00:12:20 SL: Same. I was in commo. I was with the 388th Transportation Company. And what these companies did, as well as the 20th Transportation in Cu Chi, what they would do, was if there was an aircraft down—shot down or crashed—a team would go in to recover it.

SL: There would be a Chinook, which was a heavy-duty helicopter with two rotors on either side and a team which would be in a Healy, a small chopper. And they would go into where this craft was and they would be landed. They would rig up the chopper; the Chinook would take it up, you know, and they would take it back to base to be repaired, if possible, or salvaged. And that's what we did. I was in the communications part of that company. And again, we did a number of things, but at Vung Tau, two of the main things that I did, that I remember, was to sit in—it was called an Angry-47. It was a unit with the radios in it and teletype. And I would stay up at night and enter in, basically, codes for equipment, parts for aircraft. And I would just do that and type them in, on chad tape, like the old ticker tape. And I would run that, make that tape, and then I'd run the tape through a machine that was sent off to Saigon to order the parts.

00:14:21 SL: The other part of what I remember is that every now and then, these Navy carriers would come in from across the ocean and they'd have aircraft on them, mostly helicopters, Hueys. And I would go out with a unit, as the ship-to-shore communications, with a small radio pack. And they would go on the ships. Each helicopter, they had to take their preservative out of the engines and fuel them, and put the rotor blades on, and then they'd fly them off. And that took a few days to do that. So, I was part of that duty. And then there are other things, like

you're stringing wire and just hanging out basically. So that's what I did at Vung Tau, officially.

00:15:19 SL: Unofficially, I remained stoned. The cần sa in Vietnam was very good, cần sa. And make you beaucoup “dinky tao.”

00:15:35 RJM: What do these words mean?

SL: “Make you very high, make you a little crazy.” So I smoked a lot of pot there.

RJM: Had you ever smoked pot before you went to Vietnam?

00:15:47 SL: A little bit. Actually, the first time I got high was in Fort Gordon, Georgia. In late '66, a couple of my buddies, one of my buddies on leave, brought some back from Philadelphia. And that was an experience.

00:16:07 SL: So everything was going smoothly until January of 1968. And that's when Tet came along. Of course, everywhere in the country, you know, Tet effect was, there was ... the offensive was experienced. In fact, one of the reasons I was very lucky leaving Cu Chi, was Cu Chi was hit very hard during the Tet Offensive. And I mean Cu Chi was leveled. Because, you see, Cu Chi—we hadn't realized it—but there were tunnels underneath of us. It was like there was a Viet Cong base right underneath of us all. And when Tet came along, they leveled it, basically rockets and stuff. I was glad I wasn't there.

00:16:57 SL: But in Vung Tau, yeah, we were hit with some action from the Tet Offensive. And what I remember is that the alert came and we were supposed to hit whatever shelter was closest to us. And I ended up in a barracks with Navy Seabees and I was stuck there until I saw my supply sergeant go by and I said,

“Hey, Sarge, get me out of here.” So he says, “Okay,” you know, and he got me out of there. At that point, you see, everybody was requisitioned a weapon. And when I got to the supply room, all the weapons had been handed out except for a 45-automatic, which I had to take. So that changed things a little bit. But then after a little while, in February, and see, I was slated to leave in April because that was the year. And in February, my request for RR came through, and I had waited and hoped that they would open up Australia.

SL: So, I ended up going to Australia in February of 1968.

RJM: What part?

00:18:47 SL: Sydney. And I was there for a week. It was great. Australia was an experience. What struck me about it was two things. One is the traffic: instead of looking over one shoulder to see if cars were coming, you had to look over the other shoulder, right? And also, it reminded me a lot of the 1940s in the United States; it had that feel to it. And so, I spent a week or two—you know, I can't remember—there in Australia.

SL: And I came back and the plane came into Vietnam and landed at Tan Son Nhut. I was sitting there waiting for an airplane to take me to Vung Tau. And I see this guy who's very familiar walk across the tarmac. And that was Bill Frank.

RJM: Wow.

00:19:41 SL: Okay. And Bill Frank actually wrote about me and I made the front page, below the fold. But he also mentions it in his book, *Bill Frank's Delaware*.

RJM: So, was this in the *News Journal*?

SL: Yep. It was in the *News Journal*. But he only made a quick response to it. Here (reading from *Bill Frank's Delaware*) he said, "But one day in February 1968 in a place called Vung Tau, I was walking across its airport." He's mistaken there; it was Tan Son Nhut. I was going to Vung Tau. And he goes on. He says, "I heard a voice loud and clear, 'Hello, Wilmington!'" Actually, I said, "Hello Bill Frank." But, you know, for journalistic reasons, you don't want to point this out. And he goes on to say, "... it came from someone in a bunch of GIs lolling about the ground with their duffle bags. I looked hard for the person who was calling. But once more, even louder than before, came 'Hey, Bill Frank,' and then stood up Spec-4 Steven J. Leech, Jr. of Richardson Park, graduate from Conrad High School, Wesley College at Dover, and when we met, a radio operator with the 388th Transportation Battalion." That's actually Company, at Vung Tau. "And you can bet I chewed the fat with him, photographed him, and thanked him for having recognized me from way back." That was the reference he did in there (the book).

00:21:20 RJM: So, if I look in the *News Journal*, would I be able to find ...

SL: Oh, yeah, yeah. It is somewhere in the month of February, I'm not sure exactly, but yes. And it includes the photograph he took of me.

00:21:32 RJM: Great. Did you run into other Delawareans in the period when you were overseas?

00:21:37 SL: Well, when I was drafted, I was drafted with a bunch of Delawareans. I don't remember that I actually ran into any. I briefly ran into my cousin, who was there. He was in the engineers. He was the son of my mother's sister.

RJM: What was his name?

00:22:03 SL: Wilbur Gregory, "Woody" Gregory. He was an officer. And we briefly had a chat on the telephone. I don't think we ever actually met, but I knew him from before. But none that I can remember except him. My best friend over there was in Vung Tau, a Native American by the name of Plain Feather. There was one character who was like a character from *Catch-22*, whose name is Luis J. diCarlo, the only person who took LSD in Vietnam that I can remember. But, yeah.

00:23:03 RJM: Well, what was the awareness of the Tet Offensive at the time? How did that affect your new fear or morale?

00:23:14 SL: Oh, yeah. There was a marked difference that I experienced, more use of opiates. Afterwards, I noticed that some GIs would actually find some of this black heroin that they would put on the edge or ends of their cigarettes. That was pretty rough. But, and yeah, there was a morale problem, yeah, that people began to realize that, at least in my experience, that things were, weren't right here. In fact, speaking of opiates, I'll show you this other picture (shows front cover of *Powmia Among the Drangonflies* by Steven Leech). That's from my little novel about, in fact, a lot of the things that happened to me in Vietnam, are in here, but there's a fictional aspect as well. But that's me right there.

00:24:15 SL: Okay. And the story behind that (the book cover image) is one of my other duties was to, see, what we had was all these women, who would come in and clean the billets and shine your shoes and then take your laundry overnight and come back the next day with clean laundry. And that's what we were sitting on here.

00:24:34 SL: And in this particular picture, I was waiting for a truck, a small truck to come by to be brought by so that I could drive them outside of the base. And so that's me. I'm sitting with them. This one here, you can't see her. She was kind of like a girlfriend at the time. But I knew all these women and I was waiting for that truck. Now the thing about this is that I had gone downtown a little earlier that day and visited the opium den. So, I had smoked some opium and usually Pappasan, after he set things up for you and you smoked the opium, he would give you a joint. And we would sit out on his porch and smoke pot together, and get very, very high. And I had just come back from that experience so in this particular picture, I was in heaven. I mean it was warm, the sun was coming down. I was surrounded by all these women. And, and I just remember it was very memorable. Well, the picture came to me, I guess maybe several weeks later. This guy I had never seen before, he stops by the commo shed and said, "Man, I gotta picture of you." I said, "Oh, yeah?" Yeah. And he handed me this picture and I never saw him again. So that's how that picture came into existence.

00:26:19 RJM: So, you came home in April?

00:26:23 SL: I came home in April. I actually, again, from Vung Tau, we were flown to, or I was, because my tour of duty had left, flown to Tan Son Nhut, and was waiting for the big plane, the big silver bird to take us back to the world, to come. And I was sitting in there in that little area, it's a shed. And because I had come over with a unit, the 20th Transportation from Cu Chi, there were a number of GIs, who I had, I didn't know them. I mean, they were familiar to me from the 20th Transportation and Cu Chi were coming from the same time because we came over at the same time. And I remember this one GI was pissed; he was so mad. He was livid. And the reason he was livid was before his tour of duty was up, he

had gone into Cambodia, to get an airplane, him and some others. And that's when we weren't supposed to be in Cambodia. But this aircraft was downed in Cambodia and so they had to go in and get it. So, they went in to get it and as they were coming down to get the aircraft, they were ambushed. And they were ambushed and no one could help them because we weren't supposed to be there. And he was pissed because they didn't come and get him. They had to fight their way out or at least hold their ground until someone decided yeah, we'll send someone in, you know, or have a surreptitious airstrike or whatever they did. I can't remember, but he was really angry. And I can see from that experience how some of the Vietnam veterans struggled after the war with PTSD. And so, I do remember that.

00:28:35 SL: And the other thing I remember is listening to the Armed Forces Radio and hearing about the riots after the (Martin Luther) King assassination. Of course, King's assassination and the riots, they were naming off the cities ...

RJM: Wow.

00:28:50 SL: ... and one of them was Wilmington. So well, when I got back to Richardson Park, which is right outside of Wilmington, I could stand in the backyard of my family's home and see the smoke coming up.

00:29:03 RJM: So that was, let's see, April 4th is when King was assassinated, and then a couple of days after that?

SL: Yes.

00:29:21 RJM: Where did you fly home to?

00:29:29 SL: San Francisco and then caught a trip across the country to Philadelphia. It's interesting about that trip from Vietnam to San Francisco. We stopped in Japan, briefly. And I remember getting off the plane and it was a real fog and I would've thought it was a dream except I bought a cigarette lighter there, which I still have somewhere. But from that point on, until we got to San Francisco, I don't remember anything. Now, your monitors just went off here? (Reference to the recording device.)

RJM: It's ok.

00:30:10 SL: I don't remember anything; it was just like black hole. I remember sending out of Japan and landing in San Francisco. But yes. And I remember my father meeting me when the airplane landed in Philadelphia and he took me home.

00:30:28 RJM: Were you the only serviceman on the plane or were you traveling with regular commercial ...

00:30:39 SL: Regular from San Francisco, oh yeah, regular commercial? I think we, no ... okay. The plane went to Los Angeles, right? Okay. I forget. It went from San Francisco to Los Angeles because when I got the Los Angeles, I called my cousin who at that time lived in, somewhere in Orange County and talked to her for a few minutes, then caught the plane from Los Angeles to Philadelphia. And I don't remember anything about that flight either.

00:31:00 RJM: You must have been exhausted.

00:31:13 SL: Yeah, exhausted, evidently.

RJM: What was it like to come home?

00:31:19 SL: It was a relief. You're bringing back memories, now. A few days after I came home, someone was murdered about a half a block away in Richardson Park. I remember seeing him in the ambulance because we had those old Cadillac ambulances with the windows. I remember seeing him white as a sheet being taken away and that was a week afterwards. And I tried to resume my life. I liked to go to movies. I remember going to a movie in Wilmington during the occupation. And coming out of the movie, like the old days waiting for the bus, right. Which never came because there was a curfew. So, yes. I remember having to call my father and saying, "Look, I can't get home." Yes. So, he came and got me. I remember the troops in the streets in Wilmington. They kind of amused me because, you know, here they were, it seemed to me like they were not quite real. I mean, as far as, you know, "You think you're a soldier?" You know? Yeah. Yeah. I came back from a real war, but eventually the chickens came home to roost. And I could start drawing parallels between the way the Vietnamese were treated, the way African-Americans were treated. Because they're both on the wrong end of the guns. And because, you see, the way the war was sustained in Vietnam was that the Vietnamese were not respected at all. I mean, they were referred to by racial slurs. And, of course, everyone would, could be an enemy person. And I realized the parallels between the Vietnamese and the African Americans. And that slowly enlightened me. That led to a slow-motion epiphany.

00:33:50 RJM: Can you talk about the neighborhood where you grew up and Wilmington in general, in terms of your racial awareness of your neighbors and classmates?

00:34:04 SL: Yeah. Wilmington was, well, Richardson Park was all white. It was, you know, if you were black, you didn't walk through Richardson Park. I didn't have black friends until Conrad and they weren't really friends. I mean, I knew people

who were black. That's where I met Teddy Henry of Teddy and the Continentals because he was a classmate. And even my other neighborhood, see, because my parents were split up; they split in '57. And my mother, after a period of hospitalization, lived with my grandmother, in Wilmington on Baynard Boulevard, and they had a store at 34th and Washington. And the area around the store was all white, predominantly Jewish. There were a couple of synagogues in that neighborhood. One, I think, two of them are still there.

00:35:09 SL: But eventually the neighborhood changed because you see, in Wilmington, throughout the Sixties, there was the growth of the suburbs. And these were new neighborhoods that white people went to. And the city became subjected to black urban diaspora. Where black people were, in Wilmington, mainly lived on the East Side, in Southbridge. And after the riots, folks moved out except for, you know, working class ethnic neighborhoods, like Browntown and Hedgeville, and what we call Little Italy. And it was among those neighborhoods that were being encroached upon by this inner diaspora, which was brought on, actually, by the Poplar Street A Project.

00:36:20 RJM: What was that?

00:36:22 SL: In 1961 or thereabouts the east side of Wilmington was torn down from Poplar Street. Actually, before that, from French Street to Spruce Street, from 9th Street, to Fourth Street, just torn down. And this is where, this was the black neighborhood. And as a result, a lot of these families had to find other places to live in Wilmington. And at the same time was this white flight from Wilmington into these new neighborhoods that were springing up.

00:37:05 RJM: What was the area torn down for? Was there new building or construction?

00:37:11 SL: Robert Moses. It was that whole fad of urban renewal that folks in Wilmington called "Negro removal." That was the reason. It destroyed the city. And the other thing that destroyed the city was I-95, which meant that the block between Adams and Jackson Street was torn down to make the right of way there. And it created a barrier, kind of an invisible barrier between black folk who were moving into the west side and Little Italy, which was on the other side, the west side of I-95. And there's a lot of tension growing there. As a matter of fact, I can refer a book written by someone who I admire greatly: a historian by the name of Carol Hoffeecker wrote a book called *The Capital City* or something like that. Which, and she explains it very well, the process here, because I didn't see this firsthand because I was either in Dover at college or in the army. But she explains it quite accurately. So, in my uncle's, in the neighborhood around my uncle's store at 34th and Washington, he went through a lot of difficulties there.

00:38:44 RJM: What was your uncle's name?

00:38:46 SL: Frank Gasser, he had Franklin Gasser Pharmacy. And then there was Gasser's Market, which was behind it. That was my Uncle John, but he had passed away in '68; I lost two uncles in '68, Uncle John and Uncle Emmet. And of the three boys, my Uncle Frank was the only one left.

00:39:12 RJM: What were the difficulties for the store?

00:39:16 SL: Well, the neighborhood began to change. And his store was, you know, quite an open kind of place with glass windows. And the merchandise was, you know, out on the floor in aisles couple of aisles. There was a soda fountain there. In fact, my first job was as a soda jerk there.

00:39:47 SL: But as time went on these new students who were moving in, gradually moving into the neighborhood, would steal, shoplift, break the windows. He had to replace the windows a couple of times. And he actually changed his hours so that the store would be closed when school let out instead of lunchtime, which was a little bit earlier. So, he kind of shifted his hours over so that the store would be closed and kids wouldn't flood in there and steal. Stuff like that.

00:40:23 RJM: What school was in that area?

SL: P.S. du Pont. And he eventually closed the store in 1973 after my grandmother died. Some other things went on that are not pertinent. So it changed a lot there. Yeah.

00:40:48 RJM: What was your awareness of youth gangs in Wilmington when you were growing up and when you came back from Vietnam?

00:40:56 SL: The only gangs that I knew about were like when I was living in Richardson Park in the late Fifties. There were a number of gangs and they were named after neighborhoods. The two toughest ones were the Madison Street gang. And at that time, Madison Street, the people that lived there in the late Fifties were families of ship workers. And they lived in Madison, poor white, working class whites. The other tough gang was the Minquadale gang. Same sort of folks. And, of course, there was the Richardson Park gang. And I was, it really wasn't kind of organized, it was just a bunch of guys, you know. And actually, I was kind of a junior member of the Richardson Park gang. I had a leather jacket, and I had a switch blade knife, that kind of stuff, you know. And we did go on a rumble once, but it amounted to nothing.

00:42:06 RJM: What was that like?

00:42:19 SL: Well, what happened was me and my friend, Tommy, we were up at the railroad tracks, you know there's tracks that cross Maryland Avenue, by Canby Park. And back then they were a lot more active because freight would be taken to the GM plant so the trains were pretty regular. And so what we were doing was, we were up there hopping trains and waiting for the train to come along, maybe take a little ride. And we were sitting at the tracks, waiting for the trains. And this gang of boys came along and challenged us. And they had BB guns. And a little bit of a fight ensued. And I got a black eye, I think.

SL: Anyway, after it was all over, you know, we sort of fled because there were more of them than us. We went to one of the houses in Richardson Park there on South Du Pont Road. And a lot of the other guys were in there playing cards. And when Tommy and I walked in, you know, "What the heck happened to you?" And we told them we were jumped up on the tracks. Well, says, "All right. Sounds like it was the Browntown gang to me," because that's the closest neighborhood, or Hedgeville or someplace. So we all got together with sticks and stuff and headed on down to Browntown ready for ... Of course, we didn't find anyone, so we turned around and came on back. But those are the only gangs I remember. I mean that we didn't name ourselves out of anything or wear colors or anything like that or ...

00:43:53 RJM: What was your understanding of what was going on with gangs in April 1968?

00:43:59 SL: I had no idea there were any gangs. I didn't know about it until I started talking to others. I didn't know anything about WYEAC or anything until I fell in

with a lot of the radicals at the university where I eventually was able to matriculate in the summer of '68 with the summer school here. I remember one class I took that was memorable because the professor was Ernest J. Moyne.

00:44:26 RJM: Who was he?

SL: He was, I think he was emeritus. He came in to teach some summer courses.

RJM: What subject?

SL: English literature. American literature, I'm sorry, because I remember that we read some Henry James. And I remember actually impressing him with some idea that I had about a story that James had written called "A Lie." But he was a lovely man. And I also learned later that he did some research on Poe's visit to Newark, which is upstairs. I can find it for you.

00:45:16 SL: But anyway, I was accepted to the University, and I fell in with the radicals thanks to a fellow by the name of Charles Priebe, who I'd known from the late Fifties, early Sixties. Because in spite of being, you know, sort of, not-a-juvenile delinquent, but someone around with the guys. I was also a Boy Scout. And also went to church, go figure.

RJM: Where did you go to church?

00:45:52 SL: St. James in Newark, Newport. And Charlie Priebe's father was the minister there at the time. And I was interested in, I started to get interested in politics. And Charlie and I talked politics. And the politics that I became interested in was socialism, communism. My father used to bring home magazines, one of

which was the *USSR Magazine*, later became *Soviet Life* or something. So, I became interested in that and I would talk to these things, talk to Charlie about these things. And then after I was drafted and all that other stuff like that I've just talked about, I came back to the University. I ran into Charlie again ...

00:46:54 RJM: Was he a student here at the time?

00:46:56 SL: He was a student at the University at the time, I think he was. And he knew all the people who were radicals here at the time. He introduced me, or he introduced me to the crowd that consisted of people like Phil Bannowsky, George Wolkind, Art Magness, a number of others. And so I fell in with them and felt very good. Here are people who finally sort of thought and felt like I did. Plus, they were all freaks. They used to wear these buttons on campus with the words F, O, C, "FOC." But it really stood for Freak On Campus. And these were all the youngsters who were experimenting with ...

00:47:53 RJM: Was that specific Delaware or was that nationwide kind of ...

00:47:57 SL: I'd never seen that before. So, it might have been, you know. And of course, the *Heterodoxical Voice*, I remember reading the *Heterodoxical Voice*. Actually, the first place I visited after I got back here, before I came down here to the University was a little head shop up in Wilmington called the Underground Shop or something. And it was there that I bought my first rolling papers and stuff like that. And it was there that I saw the *Heterodoxical Voice* for sale. So, I think I bought my first copy there, maybe May of '68. Then when it came to the University, I ran in on everybody who was ...

00:48:37 RJM: Where did you get pot from at the time?

00:48:43 SL: Brooklyn.

RJM: Did you have to go get it?

SL: Well, one of my friends, one of my army buddies at Vung Tau, what was his name? Last name was Matos. Lived in Brooklyn, he was a Latin guy, Carmelo Matos, I think was his name. So I went up and visited him. And I scored my first pot there in Brooklyn. But I couldn't score anyone, any here until I fell in with all these folks here at the University. And I could get it all over. I can tell you there are some famous people from whom I scored.

00:49:30 RJM: Were your new friends on the campus interested in your experiences in Vietnam? Did they ask you about ...

00:49:36 SL: No. They actually thought I was a CIA agent because, see, here's the thing. When you're in the army, right? There's certain things you hunger for. You probably heard GIs hunger, "When I get home, I'm gonna have pancakes." Yeah. Because they're not here. Well, one of the things I wanted to do was to dress well, because my father dressed well; he was a bit of a dandy. And so I used to come to school dressed in a tie, you know, jacket. And they thought, "He's sort of square," you know, and they thought, well, I was an agent. And, of course, I showed up on the scene pretty quickly. Thanks again to Charlie Priebe. And so they were all suspicious of me. But that all sorta changed when I started to drop psychedelics with them.

00:50:30 RJM: So how old were you then?

SL: Well, '68, Twenty, 25, I guess. Yeah. Yeah. It's two years after ...

RJM: Did you know Ray Ceci?

SL: Yeah. And I learned later Ray Ceci didn't like me very much.

RJM: Because he also was a veteran and around that age.

00:50:52 SL: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. I didn't know Ray Ceci. Like I say, you know, he kept away from me. And George Wolkind told me in later years, that Ray, he didn't like me. But this was many years after, in the early Seventies. Ray and George and I and a few others worked at the docks in Wilmington unloading ships. And so we were all there together on the same crew with others. And we worked on loading bananas and coconuts, meat and stuff like that. And Ray Ceci was part of that group that worked up there. Ray stayed away from me. But so yeah, I knew and I didn't know Ray Ceci.

00:51:48 RJM: So, what was your sense of what was going on with the radicals on campus and what were their issues?

SL: Well, they were antiwar. They were for equal rights.

RJM: For who?

SL: For Black folks. And getting high. But mainly antiwar. I mean, you can see the issues if you go through the *Heterodoxical Voice*. A lot of issues and less on the cultural things that ...

00:52:38 RJM: How did you feel as a veteran? You had served overseas. Did you come to the antiwar perspective?

- 00:52:50 SL: Yeah. Quite quickly. I mean, soon as I got home, basically when I saw what was happening in Wilmington. And of course, I became against the war when I was there. I saw that this war, you know, we shouldn't have been there. We were getting involved with people who we despised, whether they were friendly or not. And it was very easy for me to identify with those issues when I got home, instantly.
- 00:53:32 RJM: So, the equal rights that you spoke of, what was your awareness of the civil rights movement before you went to Vietnam? And how aware were you of Martin Luther King?
- 00:53:52 SL: Well, I was aware of Martin Luther King. I'd see him on television and there was a lot of coverage of him then. I think I sympathized with the civil rights movement before Vietnam. It wasn't the main issue with me because a lot of personal kinds of things were going on. And I was involved with my studies in school, stuff like that. I do remember that I did watch the March on Washington live on television when I was at Wesley. I was there during ... what do they call it? Orientation week. So, I was there early in August, so I actually did see that all on television. First time I ever saw Bob Dylan, was at that march and I watched the whole thing. And I do remember the speech and everything. I tacitly agreed with everything. And I wasn't at that point really enthusiastic about joining any movement or anything like that. But I certainly sympathized. But it wasn't until after the war that I really kind of felt much more strongly about things.
- 00:55:38 RJM: Did you become active in any way on behalf of civil rights?
- 00:55:46 SL: Not until much later. In the Seventies actually, when I became involved with the local Black press. That was around 1974-1975. Actually, yes. Before that, now I remember. Before that in the Seventies, '73 because, see, I left the area

for a while. I lived in Boston for a little while. Then came back to, again, finish my education because in '68, I turned on, tuned in, and dropped out. So, I had to go through a process of getting back into school because I knew that I wanted to get a degree which was, and I was told that I would never go to college by my high school guidance counselor.

00:56:54 RJM: So you had to prove him wrong?

00:56:57 SL: *Her.* See, at Conrad there was this big plant called GM, right? And she was trying to steer all the boys to working at the plant. She told me, she told my brother, that we weren't college material. As it turned out, we both got degrees. She was ... I saw through that after a while.

00:57:22 SL: So, I was here at the University and this is later on in the Seventies. And I was involved with a newspaper here called *Viewpoint*. This was in '74. Yeah, '73, '74, '75. And that was more issue-oriented. In fact, the issues got, well, it's a long story, but it's not '68. Yeah, but yeah, I did get involved there, finally. I did write an article for the *Heterodoxical Voice*; it was in the very last *Heterodoxical Voice*, which came out January 1970. It was a sort of a fiction story entitled "We Have No Flag," which was about Vietnam and the Vietnam War. You can look it up. It's over there somewhere. Or no, it's over there (pointing to Library locations).

00:58:24 RJM: And did you speak out against the war at any point?

00:58:28 SL: Yeah. Yeah. That was not until 1969, I think, and there was an antiwar rally out on Harrington Beach, behind the Scrounge, the student center. And I was the second Vietnam veteran to speak out against the war. And the reason I was second is because there were two of us. The other guy went first.

RJM: Do you remember who the other one was?

SL: No.

RJM: Can't remember?

SL: No. Kinda to round out 1968, late '68, I turned on, like I said, tuned in, dropped out and began to experiment with psychedelics.

00:59:10 RJM: Was there much of that on campus? Or was that just in the community?

SL: No. that was on campus.

RJM: I happen to remember that 1968 is when WXDR—is that what the call number was then?

SL: No. Okay. I do remember that, yes.

RJM: Were you involved then?

00:59:30 SL: No, and the reason was, it was WHEN and it was an AM station. And the station was in the old Armory building, there at Academy Street and Delaware Avenue. And it was an AM station using carrier current. Carrier current meant that the signal was sent over the electrical grid, didn't radiate into the air except maybe incidentally around the grid. I had been actually involved with a radio station and, you lost your video again (reference to recording monitor) at Wesley College and that was WSLY. It was the same kind of thing, carrier current. And that's where my radio experience began. Though in Vietnam, I did a

different kind of radio. Then when I came to the campus I saw that WHEN, you know. Then I looked into it a little bit and realized that it was just carrier current and that it, you know, I had done that before. I wasn't interested in doing any kind of radio that I couldn't listen to. And also, sort of a cynical attitude says, "Look, I've done radio under fire in Vietnam. Why would I want to bother with this?" So I knew about it, but I didn't get involved because of those reasons.

01:01:03 SL: And I didn't get involved until the mid-80s with a radio station here, when they actually began to radiate. Actually they did that before, but they were like really low wattage. So no, I didn't get involved for those reasons.

01:01:23 RJM: You mentioned at the antiwar rally there was another veteran. Did you meet many other veterans and did you ever do things together or talk to each other at that time?

01:01:33 SL: Let me think. Actually, I did run into some veterans, but they weren't part of any kind of group. There was a fellow up in Wilmington who I met with a couple of times. And no, not really. I can't really think of anyone who I knew. I knew a couple, three guys or several guys who didn't make it back. One was a friend from Conrad. He was one of the early casualties, Freddie Smith, and a couple of guys who I went through Basic and other training with—Jake Weldon and Clever Jones. They didn't make it back.

01:02:40 RJM: Was the military integrated, your group?

SL: Oh, yeah. Quite integrated, yeah. As a matter of fact, when I, right after I was drafted, we were all shipped to Fort Jackson as sort of like a pre-orientation or pre-selection process there, where they just try to determine where we would go. And I got put into a billet, it's a barrack thing, more like a

tent, with a bunch of white guys. I felt very uncomfortable. And so I moved over to another tent with a bunch of Latinos and I felt much more comfortable there. But yeah, it was quite integrated.

01:03:37 RJM: Is that because there was ...

LS: I just had problems with white people. I just don't know what it was ... probably some deep psychological ...

01:03:52 RJM: So were you aware of other rallies or protests that were going around in the cities like Washington, or in Chicago in August?

SL: Yeah, I was actually there for the large antiwar rally in November 1968 in Washington.

RJM: Did you go with others from Delaware?

01:04:17 SL: Yeah. Yeah. We went on a bus together and I remember being part of a confrontation with the police there in front of the Justice Department. There was a break-off segment of the thing that was going to siege, to seize the Justice Department or something like that. We went over partly out of curiosity. And I remember the tear gas and the cops coming at us trying to push us back. And actually, me and a couple other people did knock down a couple of cops getting out of there. I forgot.

01:05:03 RJM: Who were the folks from Delaware? Was it just friends from campus?

SL: Well, I remember I was with Phil Bannowsky and his wife at that time, Hattie; I can't remember who else.

RJM: But a busload of people went?

SL: Oh, yeah. A whole busload.

RJM: And did you know people who had gone to Chicago in August?

SL: Yes. I remember them coming back. Yes. One guy had got hit in the head. He had a wound.

RJM: Was that Art Magness?

01:05:40 SL: Yes. Art Magness.

RJM: Magness, because his picture was in the *Heterodoxical Voice*. Leo Tammi took it.

SL: Right, right. Leo Tammi took that. Art, I knew Art. He was one of them. The first time I actually came in contact with George Wolkind, though I kind of met him, you know, here and there, but there was a coffee house here—well, in Newark—called the Phoenix. And I remember going there one night. And George was giving a talk about Chicago and the experience there, the riots. And George is a great storyteller and I remember that very well. He was mesmerizing, very charismatic, and he laid it all out for us there. There are others who I knew, but the ones, the two who stick out, George and Art Magness. Yeah.

01:06:45 RJM: Yeah. Can you talk about George and was he sort of a leader?

SL: He was a firebrand, that's the way I would characterize him. He was very involved in the *Heterodoxical Voice*, did a lot of writing there. He's a very good writer. Later on, he broke away and joined the Weathermen. You probably know that, and did a lot of the Weatherman kinds of things. I think I was kind of associated, I won't say associated; I was very familiar with what went on there. Not very familiar, but somewhat familiar. Then for a while he left and went out to other places and did the Weatherman thing, came back to Newark, ran for mayor, became the lead singer for Snakegrinder.

01:07:55 SL: Snakegrinder. Yeah, I remember them in their early incarnation. When Eddie Day was the lead singer. In fact, Eddie Day used to come by where I was living at the time. I was living with a couple of gals over on Kells Avenue, 2 Kells Avenue, right there in the corner. And Eddie Day would come by, and you know, we'd all get loaded together. And he was, I saw him singing with Snakegrinder.

01:08:33 RJM: Was that the early Seventies?

01:08:37 SL: No, this was in 1969.

RJM: Oh, wow.

SL: Yeah. And they did a thing on the, used to be a building, Park Place and South College. I think it was also called the Deer Park, but it was the Deer Park Mansion. And they had like a porch and they were performing on the roof of the porch.

RJM: It was the old Odd Fellows house.

SL: Was that what it was?

RJM: No, the Red Men's (Lodge).

SL: Okay.

RJM: Then it was the fraternity, the Jewish fraternity ...

SL: Okay. Well, I didn't know. I just knew that's where the building was, and they performed on the roof of the porch. And they were very good. I was quite impressed. And so I kind of knew Eddie Day.

RJM: Do you remember approximately how long that band was together then? With various ...

S:L That's the first time I ever heard of them. In fact, I didn't know Eddie was part of that band until I saw the band and said, "Oh my God, that's Eddie Day up there." And of course, you know the story, what happened to him?

RJM: No, what?

01:09:52 SL: Oh, this was like in the Seventies. I can't remember the year. But Eddie and some other people were in the Deer Park drinking and they were taking Quaaludes. And the only other person I knew who was there, was a young fellow who went by the name of Kool-Aid, poet, Black guy, African American. And he was there too. He was a witness. I don't know where he is now. George says he's downstate somewhere, not sure. But he was, they were all at the Deer Park there. Drinking, taking Quaaludes and stuff. And so they decided to leave, right? And so they came out piled into the car. And they intended to go to turn around to go down Elkton Road or out Delaware Avenue. And there's that little

road in front of Wonderland where you can turn around. Well, they didn't use that route. They turned on the tracks and got stuck there, straddled on the rails. And there's a train coming. So Eddie logically says, "I'll go up and stop the train so they don't hit my car." Well, that didn't work out that way. The train killed him. And that's what happened to Eddie Day. And of course, later on, Eddie Day lived on. Because he appeared to George Wolkind as a flash of light or whatever—George can tell the story better than I—said, "You're going to be the lead singer of Snakegrinder." And George says, "I've never sung anything in my life." And then some time later, Steve Roberts gives him a call and invites him over to sing in Snakegrinder, right? So maybe the ghost of Eddie Day visited Steve Roberts, too, I don't know. Strange things happened back then.

01:12:06 RJM: So, overview of 1968, when you think about that time, and does that year stand out?

01:12:17 SL: Very much, very much. Not only that, no, another one that we didn't cover was the assassination of Robert Kennedy.

RJM: Yeah.

SL: I remember being woken up by my father that morning and him telling me that Robert Kennedy had just been assassinated, you know, of course he was still alive at that point; he didn't die until like several, a day or so after. And I remember a friend of mine, John Wooten was his name. I had known him from before I had been drafted. I met him in the Civil Air Patrol—I was in the Civil Air Patrol for a while—and reunited with him after the war. And we actually did go down to the train station in Wilmington, and saw the train coming through. And actually saw Teddy Kennedy and Jackie Kennedy sitting in that little porch at the

last car. You could see the coffin in the car as they came through. That happened in '68. So yeah, a lot of things going on in '68 as a memorable year.

01:13:38 RJM: And do you think that was a turning point at all in your life? A growing awareness?

SL: Absolutely. Yeah. Yeah. It was like it was very pivotal year. I mean, among other pivotal years, but that was quite pivotal. Changed me forever. It was mind expanding. It was enlightening, I mean like another memorable event was my first experience on LSD, which just changed everything, along with everything else that was swirling around, quite a year.

RJM: Alright, thanks Steven!